

Christian Meditation: Beyond Devotion, Intellect

What of Sophia's presence? The Spirit whom God sent after Jesus returned home.

Part I

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THE EXODUS OF PILGRIMS from the West to the East has begun to ebb. There was the gut feeling that the Western Church was not providing — could not provide — a fulfillment of this deep-seated hunger and yearning for the God-experience. Indeed, since the Reformation, the Church had all but lost its contemplative tradition.

So there has been a turning to the East. Monks and nuns, professional people in all walks of society, married men and women, and especially our youth dropped out of society and travelled to the East, hoping to find there what they seemed to be denied in the West.

They were much like John Cassian and Germanus, who in the Fourth Century left Marseilles to travel to the East, to the monks and hermits of the Skete desert, searching for a teacher who could instruct them on prayer.

Now the tide seems to have turned, though still it is at the very beginning of the flood. We are discovering, and mostly since Vatican II, that we do have a valid tradition and teaching on contemplative prayer, open not only to the "spiritual elite and the experts", the Carthusians and Cistercians, etc. but open to all of us.

WE ARE COMING TO discover that contemplation is the normal

term and flowering of Christian meditation to which we are all called.

I would define Christian meditation (contemplation) as the loving knowledge of God based on the intimate experience of His presence. We arrive at this experience through listening to the Word of God, listening at ever deeper levels as we learn to leave ourselves behind.

We all realize that there can be no part-time Christians. So too can there be no part-time contemplatives. Deep within each of us our true self waits to be awakened by contemplation. We are all called to this deep prayer.

As we grow to maturity we come into touch with all levels of our being: body, soul and spirit as St. Paul describes at the end of I Thessalonians. He calls us to become whole, to become holy.

BUT THERE IS A lot of polarization around: polarization of the active and contemplative life. This of course has harmful effects in that it has alienated the vast majority of Christians from deep prayer. We think of ourselves as active or contemplative.

This seems to determine our approach to the faith. And religious as well as laity make this distinction. As 'actives' our spiritual life rests on the devotional, or the intellectual. We make no claim to a personal experience of God.

And as 'contemplatives', we are

part of a small privileged minority, separated from the world perhaps by high walls, unusual customs and sometimes non-communication.

But make no mistake, there are some called to be solely listeners to the Word of God. These live on the margin of society, on the edge of the world's busyness.

THEIR PRIMARY VALUES ARE silence, stillness and solitude where they live in the Spirit. Their spirit becomes open to the Spirit of Jesus who prays within them. His Spirit becomes their prayer, that stream of love between the Father and the Son. *Heir parent*

Of ourselves we do not know even how to pray. And because this experience is an awareness of God's love it does communicate itself to others because the experience is self-communicating.

THE CHURCH'S TRADITION WHICH was taught uninterruptedly for the first fifteen centuries held that contemplation is the normal evolution of a genuine spiritual life and open to all. And this tradition of the West came to be almost completely lost in recent centuries and is just now being rediscovered.

Lectio divina, literally "divine reading" was the method of prayer proposed for lay persons and monastics in the first Christian centuries. It was a practice that involved reading Scripture, or more exactly listening to Scripture.

Christians would repeat the words of the psalms or New Testament

with their lips so that their body entered into their prayer. They listened at ever deeper levels. Then they responded to the God they were listening to. They responded on three levels, a response consisting of three acts: *meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio.*

Pondering on the words of Scripture in the cave of their hearts, and here our Blessed Mother is the example par excellence — was called *meditatio*, "meditation". The spontaneous movement of the will in response to these reflections was called *oratio*, "affective prayer". One then moved to a state of resting in the presence of God, *contemplatio*, "contemplation".

THESE THREE ACTS MIGHT all take place in the same period of prayer — discursive meditation, affective prayer and contemplation. At times one would praise the Lord with one's lips, at other times with thoughts, sometimes with acts of the will, and sometimes with the alert attentiveness of contemplation, resting in God. It was something like Jacob's ladder with the angels ascending and descending. One's attention would go up and down the ladder of consciousness. Contemplation was regarded as the normal development of listening to the Word of God. This listening to God was not compartmentalized.

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→ Used instead of contemplation as Sarah's circle?